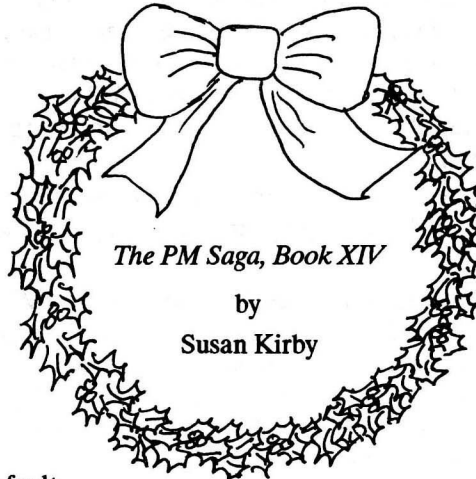


THE SUBLIME STATE  
OF CHRISTMASNESS



S. KIRBY

## THE SUBLIME STATE OF CHRISTMASNESS



It's not my fault.  
I didn't do it.  
I'm not to blame.  
I don't know what happened to PM.\*  
I am not responsible for her  
disappearance.

You may hear rumors to the  
contrary. 'Tis true, the last time I saw  
Purple Monster – that marvelous,  
mythical, and mystical Christmas  
creature – we did have a high-decibel  
shouting match. And 'tis true, she left my  
humble hovel in a bit of a snit.

And 'tis true, too, that as PM's  
Chronicler (I'm a writer – it's what I do),  
I have threatened in the past to cease and  
desist from recording her exploits.



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\*PM is a Christmas Monster, the heroine of this Saga. Her life story, detailing her work as Santa's lead sleigh puller and North Pole Ambassador, her marriage to Alabaster Eggshell, the birth of her twins, as well as the activities of other Christmas characters, are detailed in *The PM Saga*, Books I-XIII. Should you require references, "A Reader's Guide to Christmas Monsterland" is available from the author.

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But she returned safely to Christmas Monsterland after our disagreement, and it wasn't until a week later that she vanished.

Yes, I'm defensive. And worried! I want her found. It's just that, here I am at the North Pole again, it's Christmas Eve, and I have Christmas shopping to do, not to mention coloring and gilding the covers of this year's epic. But I suppose if we don't find PM, I won't feel much like writing, or painting, or anything else for that matter (maybe shopping – that always makes me feel better).

Herewith, what happened. After you've perused the *Case of the Incorpororeal Christmas Monster*, judge my culpability for yourself.

\*

I was in Philadelphia on Turkey Day, so I missed PM's parade appearance. Although the Christmas Crew borrowed my hovel while in the Big Apple, my only contact with PM was my scribbled "Welcome!" left on the refrigerator door, and PM's scrawl on my return noting, "Thanks for the hospitality. We ate all your Godiva Chocolates. See you soon." (*Note to Mom: Those were your chocolates. Sorry.*)

The week after Thanksgiving I was busy, busy, busy, and thus unable to schedule an appointment with PM for our annual pre-Christmas Saga background briefing. But after numerous phone calls (my machine talking to her machine), I finally made plans to meet with the mauvette Minister of Good Will on December 13.

PM popped in on the arranged day. We exchanged pleasantries, and I proffered eggnog and fruitcake. "How's your new novel going?" PM asked, munching.

"Did you notice when you stayed here," I replied, "that I painted the bathroom? Let me take you on a tour." We walked the six-foot circumference of my brilliantly enameled abode.

"But the novel?" PM inquired again, nibbling a spritz cookie.

"Notice how well I did the walls in the kitchen?" I said, pointing. "And the new tile? And how much brighter the living room looks?"

"But your novel?" she pointedly persisted.

"I'm nest building, creating a creative niche," I explained. "After I get a new couch and new chair, I'm sure I'll be inspired."

"What's going on with your first book?" PM asked, referring to a mystery I'd penned and have been peddling.

I mumbled, "My manuscript has been rejected by some of the best publishers in the U.S.," then hastened to change the subject to get down to business (and attempt to soothe my ruffled ego). I mentioned that I'd just re-read the previous 13 issues of PM's Saga. "Last year's came out pretty well. You were stunningly beautiful on the cover."



"But I'm getting smaller and smaller each year," she commented. "And I'm not dieting," she tacked on, tasting a tendered truffle.

Uh-oh, I thought, already the complaints! "Well," I said, "well, well, well, given the high price of acrylics, sprinkles, and baubles, I've had to cut back, but I'll certainly take your objection into consideration. But the story – it was a good story, right?"

"That's another item on my agenda. Not only has my cover profile shrunk, but so has my role in the narration. When the Sagas began, you may recall, I was the Star. In the past few years you've reduced my part from heroine to cameo. You've been scripting more and more of yourself and other characters, and I've been fading away. What's next, Chronicler? Will I be an extra in this year's story? Or, now that they're training you to edit at *The New York Times*, will you delete me entirely?"

Major uh-oh! Obviously, this meeting had gotten off on the wrong foot – or paw. I tried to return to the purpose of our tête-à-tête. "So, umm, umm . . . what have you been doing this past year since the microwaves?" Any lingering vestiges of your irradiated irrational jealousy?"

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\*See *A Very Crazy Christmas*, in which nefarious villains bombarded Christmas Monsterland and the North Pole with dangerous microwaves, which transmogrified into radiation that caused the character traits the characters tried most to suppress to predominate.



"It's not that my jealousy didn't exist before. I just never acknowledged it," PM reminded me. "I'm dealing with it now, venting it."

Vent it elsewhere, I wished, but said instead, "Perhaps in the last two stories there *has* been too much of me and too little of thee. I'm sure that after you've filled me in on your activities and what's going on up North, I'll produce a Saga you'll be proud to have you name on."

"You'd better," she warned. "This has been an eventful year for me. I've had to work my holly off promoting peace, in a world that at first showed great promise. But as you know, since August that promise has eroded rapidly. The Society for the Elimination of Good Will and Christmas has fueled and fanned the flames of fanaticism across the globe, and I've struggled to counter SEGWAC's pull toward greed, discord, dissension, and despair with my push for compassion, cheer, and kindness."

"No offense, PM, but what's *new*?" I interrupted. "What you've described is yesterday's news. I've already covered those doings in previous accounts. What have you done that's different? Unless you're going to reveal some diabolical SEGWAC deviousness that threatens this year's Christmas, or unless you tell me you're planning another Super Snerkle, I'm afraid my readers are just going to yawn."

PM was miffed. "Your readers? They're *my* faithful fans! Believe me, other reporters are anxious to acquire the rights to my holiday happenings."

"Where? At the *National Enquirer*?"

"Doug M. Elf has already featured me in his 'About Christmas Monsterland' column in *The North Pole Times*. He's discussed the possibility of a biography, with a movie deal and licensing. If Santa and Rudolph – not to mention Frosty the Snowman – have such lucrative deals, why shouldn't I? Al's autobiography and the movie made from it\* still generate royalties. My Saga hasn't garnered one gumdrop for my coffer. I must say, Ms. Chronicler, that you've been very, *very* lax in your attention to my comings and goings."

I was itchily irritated. "I work very hard," I retorted. "Some of my jobs even *pay* me! You gotta understand, I get hard cash for a few hundred words about a mouse, but Santa sends me only cookies and candycanes for the thousands of words (not to mention illustrations) I ink for you! Not



that I pen these parables with any desire for monetary remuneration," I appended hastily, since I actually enjoy the assignment, "but OUT HERE I have to take on the big buck projects in order to survive."

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\*See *The Prodigal Elf*, Book VII of The PM Saga.

"You wouldn't have to work so hard if you hadn't made it your calling to single-handedly boost the economies of the Fashion, King of Prussia, Olla Podrida, and Northwest Plaza malls, not to mention every store on the Upper West Side," PM spat out. "If you spent less money on your junkets to Las Vegas, Philadelphia, Dallas, and St. Louis and spent more time on me, you wouldn't be so broke."

"Those trips were necessary," I asserted. "My sister and I are researching our potential best-seller, *Great Malls of the World*. We're working now on the U.S. volume, to be followed by Canadian and European sequels, and a spin-off called *The Salutary Effects of Mall Air*."

"I question your devotion to accuracy. To my mind, you've been more acquisitive than inquisitive. Come on, Chronicler – your apartment is painted, you've bought out Tower Records and HMV Music stores, and you've made mail order companies ecstatic at the sight of your number on their Caller I.D.'s. You don't need anything more. Write my story."

This was getting too personal, and I parried her castigation with causticity. "I will," I rejoined, "when you do something worth writing about!"

That was it. And, for what it's worth (not much), I got in the last word, for in a fuchsia funk PM stomped her paw and blinked off, leaving a steamy crimson aura in her wake.

Okay, okay, I overreacted. I was rude, crude, cruel, and obnoxiously unprofessional. But I faxed an apology the next day, and with typical Christmas Monsterland charity PM modemed word through Clyde Elf's computer that we should try again. We agreed that she'd return on the 20th, when I was less kvetchy and PMS-sy, and PM was less perturbed, put out, and, yes, less pugnaciously *purple*.

So, you see, I didn't cause what happened. I swear on my Visa Gold Card, PM and I were going to work it out.

\*

I waited all day for PM to appear for our second appointment. And waited and waited. Wondering if something was wrong, I finally called the cave. That's when Al told me PM had left hours earlier. "Where is she?" Al asked, as if I knew.



"I don't know," I said, "that's why I called you. She's late."

"What have you done to her?" he insisted. "She told me about your argument. She was tremendously upset by your insults."

"Al, PM never arrived," insisted I. "I'll take an oath on my American Express and Optima cards, she never reached here."

"Harrumph," he grunted, then muttered, "she was on her way to see you last time I saw her."

"Have you checked the North Pole?" I asked, sure she'd been sidetracked.

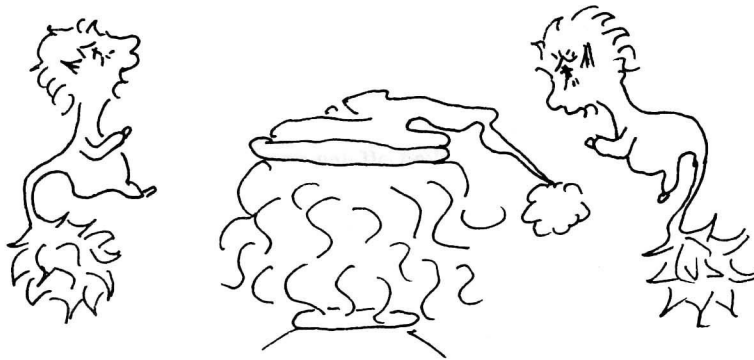
"No, I called you first."

"Communicate with the Clauses. Maybe Santa sent her on a secret mission. Ring me back if you don't find her."

Five minutes later PM's and Al's twin progeny, Geranium Amethyst and Lapis Snowflake, teletransported into my living room. "Pop sent us to see if Mom's here," Lapis said, scouting my digs.

"I must say, I resent the implication that I did not tell the truth," I grumbled resentfully, then asked, "No sign of PM?"

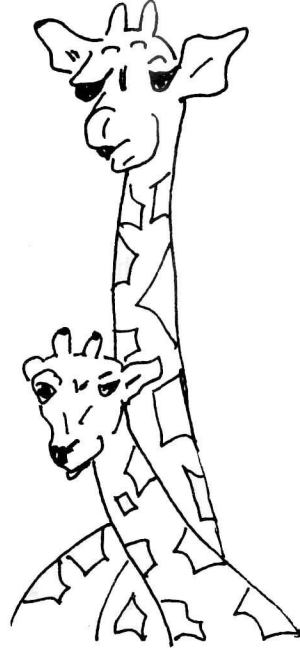
"No," said Geranium. "Dad's real worried. Santa hasn't seen her, Grandma Maraschino says she's not at her house, and Great-great-great Grandpapa Smaragd says she hasn't been to his place either. No one knows where she is."



The concern on the youngsters' muzzles made me concerned too. Where, oh where, had my grape-furred friend gone? Oh where, oh where could she be? "I'll start searching OUT HERE," I stated. "You go back to your father and assure him she hasn't been here."

After the twins, with a tweak of their tails, BOING!!ed away, I began phoning around. I spent the rest of the evening and most of the next day contacting the many buddies PM had befriended throughout her existence.

Penelope Pigeon and Brendan Boxer had not heard from her, but promised to look. Geoffrey and Gerald Giraffe stretched their necks and scanned the San Diego and Bronx zoos, but to no avail. Zanzibar, Danny, and Beau replied that she hadn't cantered into Dallas since the dressage event in August. PM was a no-show in Denver, St. Louis, Marshall, Carbondale, Philadelphia, and other points east and west, north and south. I personally went to Lord & Taylor to see if she'd been distracted looking at the Christmas windows. No luck. Then I loped over to Macy's to check if Santa's helpers had had an inspection visit, but the jolly fat men said no. (Since I was there anyway, I purchased a pair of earrings and a fantastic water globe with St. Nicholas and cute little animals in the center – it has a battery-driven motor that makes the snow swirl. But I digress.)



Peppermint Paunch answered when I called the cave to report. "Relicta and Dove have gone in the ET IT's spaceship and are searching OUT THERE," the striated detective said. I detected a distinct chill in his voice. "If the alien's antennae don't home in on PM, she's going to pass by New York, pick you up, and bring you UP HERE. Why, I don't know. Haven't you already caused enough trouble?"

I ignored Peppermint's question, assuming it to be rhetorical. "Tell Relicta to buzz me when she's close, and I'll wait on the roof," I instructed. "It's hard to find a parking place."

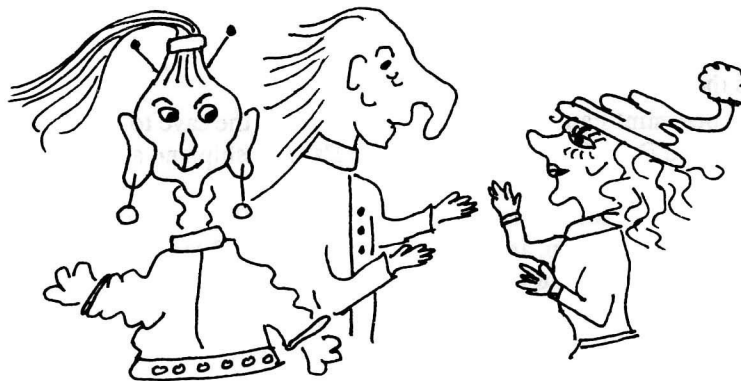
I made a quick trip to HMV Music and returned to wait in my apartment. (Yes, I went shopping again. What of it? I told you, it helps.) I turned on my stereo and listened to Vivaldi's "Winter" from "Le Quattro Stagioni." For a fleeting moment I thought PM flittered before my mind's eye, but I attributed it to being hypnotized by the flashing disk indicator of my CD changer.



By the time Relicta and Dove picked me up, PM had been missing 48 hours. I dreaded another ride in the spaceship, but geared myself for the gyring whirl. I wondered if I could add my trips to the North Pole to my Frequent Flyer Club.

The intergalactic traveler was cordial (as well she should have been, since I featured her last year) and offered me a Dramamine. "Don't be surprised by your reception at Christmas Monsterland," she warned. "Al is convinced you had something to do with PM's disappearance. He fears that PM's gone off to Iraq to single-pawedly effect some phenomenal solution to the problems there, or to the Soviet Union to give guidance to Gorby on glasnost. Al thinks she wants to do something you'll deem worth chronicling. Weren't you rather hard on her?"

"It's not my fault," I said.



"Maybe not," Dove interjected, "but even if it is--"

"It's not," I countered.

"You know once PM is found, you'll be forgiven."

"Yes," I said. "They're real big on forgiveness UP THERE. But they're humongous on remembering. They'll never let me forget it if there's an itsy bitsy iota of evidence that I contributed to PM's peril in any way. If our friend is truly in trouble, and if an agent is involved, why don't they suspect SEGWAC? Why do they jump on me first?"

"Oh my!" Relicta said suddenly, as we gazed down at the magisterial beauty of the earth below.



"What?" asked Dove.

"I don't know, it's just . . . you'll think I'm off my rocker, but I thought I saw PM, for only a micro-moment."

"Probably afternoon airsickness," Dove answered, then turned to me with a slight giggle. "You probably don't know this, but Relicta is expecting."

"What?!?" I uttered.

"We don't know yet – or when, for sure," Relicta answered. "It's so hard to tell when an extraterrestrial mates with a human. But we'll be proud parents next summer, I think."

I congratulated the two of them, and then gripped the armrest in acrophobial apprehension as the alien altered the aircraft's altitude and we descended into Christmas Monsterland.

\*

We landed softly near the entrance to PM's and Al's cave. The twins ran out to greet me. "When we popped up to the North Pole to see Santa, I thought I saw Mommy," Geranium cried, earnestly tugging on my sleeve.

"So did I!" Lapis crowed.

Geranium thumped her brother's nose. "Did not! You always copy me."

"Did too!" Lapis argued, nipping his sister's tail.

"They're just imagining it," Maraschino sighed, nodding a neutral hello. "They want their mother back so much. And I want my baby to return."

Alabaster's halloo was half-hearted as he herded me into his home. "Maybe they're not imagining it," he said. "Maybe something happened when she teletransported. Her bearings have been bonkers ever since her argument with you."

"It's not my fault," I insisted.

Peppermint Paunch, who was ponderously perched on PM's pouf, peered into his pipe, then polished his magnifying glass. He exhaled. "Friends, let's approach this with the scientific method of discovery. PM is a Missing Monster, therefore let's reconstruct the period before her disappearance, from the point of her set-to with the Chronicler."

"Not my fault," I reiterated.

"Can it, Chronicler," the Christmas contingent chorused.

I canned it.



"Al," continued Peppermint, "you say when PM returned her bearings were off. What happened?"

"She landed in the chimney. I asked if she was practicing to be Santa's back-up. She replied that she didn't know what had happened, that perhaps she just had a cold, or was just too distraught to land right."

"It's not . . ." I started, then stopped in resignation.

"I just thought of something," Maraschino mentioned. "Shortly after her trip to the Chronicler's, PM took me to Margaret Thatcher's to give a refresher course on coffee-making. On the return trip PM dumped us in the jacuzzi."

"And then she took Viridian to advise Dollar Don Trumpcard on his bankruptcy," Spruce recollected. "Her brother told me they plummeted 20 floors after lift-off from the penthouse roof before PM could whisk them back to Christmas Monsterland. Viridian was darn shaken up."

Clyde piped in. "When PM came to the North Pole three days ago, her tail was a fraction late arriving, but I thought I was having hallucinogenic flashbacks from my days of drunken debauchery."

"I saw it, too, Clyde," Elvira confirmed.

"I did too, but I thought there was a short in my nose," Rudolph said.



"Let's try a working hypothesis," Peppermint proposed. "As PM has explained it to us, she teletransports by means of a form of creative visualization. She sees a place in her mind, then twitches her tail, elevates her psyche, and she's there. Now, suppose PM had an allergy, say. Maybe she sneezed when she twitched, discombobulating her coordinates."

"Are you still smoking?" Alabaster eyed me suspiciously.

"It's not my fault," I said once again. "If you figure there's fault to be found, fault the New Madrid Fault. The tidal and gravity forces that were supposed to cause a Midwest earthquake could have interfered with PM's vibrations."



"Or," inserted Relicta, "what if the midasmetal we exploded last year to get rid of the radiation has somehow messed up PM's molecules? Any time you spit chemicals into the air, the consequences are unpredictable."

"There was a blizzard the day she disappeared," Lapis added.

"Geranium and I tried to pop off to Grandma's and couldn't, something in the atmosphere."

"You mean it's possible," Al analyzed with foreboding, "that she's evaporated into polluted air? That she blinked herself into Never-Ever-Again Land? That's she's d-d-d- I can't say it."

"No! Christmas Monster's don't die!" Maraschino cried.

"Disintegrated!" Al sobbed.

"I won't believe it!" I said. "She can't disintegrate. I'm her Chronicler, and I make the rules for this fantasy. She can't disintegrate unless *I* decide she disintegrates!"

They glared at me.

"Hey, *it's not my fault!*" I reasserted. "I refuse to believe she's gone. You probably won't believe me, but I really think I saw her this morning."

"Saw her?" Al, Peppermint, and the gang unisoned.

"Yes," I confirmed. "I was playing my stereo – I acquired a new one, you know, five disk CD changer, dual auto reverse tape deck, new speakers . . ."

"*SAW HER!?!'*"

I told them about the vision of PM converging with Vivaldi.

"I assumed it was just wishful thinking," Elvira Fernhat piped in, "but when I was in Santa's workshop, listening to a tape on my Walkman of Luciano Pavarotti singing 'Nessun dorma' . . ."

"Lucy and Norma who?" queried Clyde.

Elvira ignored the uncultured gnome. "When he hit the high note – that's the place I usually cry, it's so moving – there she was, right in front of me. Then poof, gone."

Relicta recited her cosmic contact with PM while viewing earth from the spaceship.

Dove said, "You know, this morning, when I was meditating on the sunrise, I was struck by how awesome was the golden orb as it glimmered over the glaciers. A violet specter misted through the midst of my mantra. I thought it was a mirage, but it must have been our Monster!"

Peppermint chewed on the stem of his pipe. "We may be onto something here. Maybe if we all think about her, we'll get her back!"

We all closed our eyes and thought real hard. But while we all could *picture* her, we couldn't *see* her. Al peered mournfully around the room. "We're just not doing it right," he complained. "Focus on her twinkling eyes, her heavenly heliotropic hue, her gorgeous tail, the sensuous nape



of her neck, the way her eyelashes flutter when she kisses – I see her! I see her!”

But we didn’t. And Al’s encounter was brief. “Try harder!” he begged. But try as we might, we couldn’t bring back anything but a magenta memory of our Christmas chum.

Peppermint shook his head. “I think we’re on the right track but the wrong train. Let’s pursue a different tack. Maybe we can’t bring her to us.” The striped Sherlock posed a possibility: “Maybe PM isn’t *coming* to us in our thoughts, but we’re *going* to her!”

“What do you mean?” questioned Al.

“What makes you gasp?” Peppermint asked.

Al blushed. “Snerkling,” he responded sheepishly.

“Umm, for the purposes of this experiment, try something else,” Peppermint pushed.

“Well, every time I look at our twins, I think, how wonderful, how wondrous!”

“Look at them now,” Peppermint suggested.

Al grabbed the two 5-year-olds and squeezed them. “Yes, I do see her!”

Peppermint turned to Spruce. “What about you, Uncle?”

PM’s papa pondered, then said, “I’m partial to the Claudio Arrau recording of Chopin’s Klavierkonzert Nr. 1-e moll.” Al put a disk in the CD and flipped it on. We all listened intently. “Yes! There’s my darling daughter!” Spruce lowered his eyelids in contentment at the part in the Romance movement where the piano pleads and the strings weep.

“I see her too,” I said softly. “That’s one of my favorites.”

Elvira nodded her tiny head, “Me too.”

"I don't see anything," Clyde complained, disappointed.

Rudolph agreed. "I'm with you, Clyde. I guess I'm not aroused by Arrau."

Peppermint turned to me. "Chronicler, could you make me a banana split?"

I was about to reply that I wasn't a bloomin' cook and who could think of food at a time like this. But then I realized that this was part of the experiment. I rushed into the kitchen and did as bid. When I returned, I handed the concoction to the portly private-eye and watched closely as he took a bite.



"MMMMmmmmmm," he murmured, closing his eyes as he savored a morsel, swallowed, then smiled.

"Yes, there's my cousin! I was right! In that brief millisecond of WOW!-ness,\* hovering between strawberry and vanilla, I saw her."

Alabaster's face lit in understanding. "You mean my darling PM has entered the State of the Sublime? And whenever we go there, we see her?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" I shouted energetically. "It makes sense! It's a higher State of Consciousness, the 'place' where you go, if only for an instant, when you look down from the Rocky Mountains, or listen to Horowitz's version of Beethoven's 'Appassionata,' or contemplate a rose, or stare at Van Gogh's 'Starry Night.' I went there when I saw Baryshnikov dance in 'Giselle.' When I'm on stage, we call it 'Being in the Moment.' I travel there when leaves explode autumn majestic, and when snowflakes dance on a puppy's nose. It's the spot where you have to stop – transported, mesmerized – and attend! It's Goose-Pimple Country, Voila!ville, Land of the Light Bulb!"



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\*In the interest of academic honesty (and to avoid charges of plagiarism and theft of ideas), I'll note that I first heard of the concept of Wow!ness from Dr. Nadeau, a professor at the U. of Colorado who defined art as that which makes one say "Wow!"

There was a brief silence, as we all digested the idea of PM being in a transcendental teletransportation warp.

Peppermint broke the spell. "The problem is, knowing *where* PM is isn't the same as knowing how to get her *back*."

It was late and we were all very tired. Al suggested we nab a nap. "Think good thoughts," he requested, "and if you see PM, let her know how much she's loved."

Clyde, Elvira, and Rudolph flew back to the North Pole and filled in Mr. and Mrs. Claus. Relicta and Dove retired to their ice pyramid on the border of Christmas Monsterland. I curled up on the couch, with Geranium Amethyst snuggled close beside me.

\*

The morning sunlight, filtered through stalactite prisms, rainbowed through the cavern. Geranium nudged me awake, first gently, then forcefully with a sharp jab to my shoulder. "Dad says come outside. The North Pole gang and the rest are there, conferrin'."

I grabbed a down comforter and wrapped it around my shoulders (I have yet to acclimate to the Christmas Monsterland climate). I groggily groped my way outdoors.

"I saw my lost lavender lollypop in my Dream State," I heard Alabaster tell the crew.

Dove reported, "I saw her in a State of Bliss as I contemplated a crystal."

"And I in a State of Grace," Maraschino said, "when I prayed."

"Is that anywhere near the State of Euphoria?" Rudolph asked. "I took my morning flight, and when I glided down, the wind whistling through my antlers, I passed her."

"I saw her last night in a State of Tranquility," Spruce said. "I was gazing at a flickering fire, and somehow I just knew we'd get her back, somehow."



Clyde was jumping up and down, eager to share his news. "Dr. Arké saw her in the State of Florida!"

We stared at the innocent imp and uttered an incredulous "Huh?"

"The North Pole veterinarian just got back from Disney World this morning, it's her favorite vacation spot. She and her boyfriend put on Grumpy and Dopey costumes – nobody knows they're elves! She said she ran into PM when she was on Space Mountain."



"I met her in the Creative State," Peppermint said. "I couldn't sleep, so I composed a new song for tonight's Night Before the Night Before Christmas Concert."

"It's funny," Relicta said, "I was sure I'd see her when I went jogging this morning, but she was nowhere to be found."

"That's to be expected, Alien," I said. "PM doesn't jog. Perhaps if you had taken a jazz class –"

Elvira poked Clyde. "Remember why we came so early, Clyde," she reminded.

"Yes, right-ho!" Clyde said. "Santa wants you to join him. He thinks if we put our heads together we can find a way to get PM back."

So it was off to the North Pole. I had a choice of riding with Clyde, who's not a very good sleigh driver, or rotating with Relicta. Since it wasn't much of a choice, I let everybody else pile in. Both aircraft filled up, and I found myself without a seat.

"We'll teletransport you!" Lapis volunteered.

"Sure!" Geranium agreed with gusto. "You've done it before. Lapis and I'll just link tails and BOING!, we'll be there!"

"No you don't," Alabaster hollered and quickly separated the twins (they still can't pop off without joining paws or tails). "We don't know what happened to your mother, and I'm not going to let you two take any more chances!"

"Phooey," Lapis pouted, but after I squeezed into the sleigh and wrapped myself with a lap robe, he and Geranium nestled without complaint in my lap and we were off. "I was hoping we'd see Mommy when we blinked," Geranium confided. "Dad's such a worrywart."

\*

It was a sad Santa with a sagging sack who greeted us at the Pole. Every year he faces some new catastrophe that jeopardizes Christmas, and to his chagrin this year was no exception. But as you know, dear Readers, without a Crisis, there's no Chronicle.



Mr. Claus embraced each of us, and Mrs. C. did the same.

"It's not my fault," I explained to Santa when he got to me.

Santa patted my hand – hard. "Chronicler," he said, "work on that defensive attitude problem of yours."

We sat around the pot-bellied stove, sipping hot cider through cinnamon-stick straws. The aroma of gingerbread cookies wafted through the room, occasionally dispatching one or more of us to a State of Olfactory Rapture, where we met a sniffing PM.

Santa told of seeing his lead sleigh puller when he cranked up Caruso's clown on the old Victrola. "She doesn't seem in any danger at present," Santa assured us. "But I *am* concerned. PM's condition is transiently transilient. So far she's been jumping around in states bordering the Sublime. However, while the State of the Sublime is a wonderful place to be, it's difficult to stay there. And there are other states not far off – metaphysically speaking, that is – which are less desirable."

"What do you mean, Santa?" Alabaster asked with apprehension.

Santa explained. "A psychic upheaval could launch her into more dangerous planes. For instance, the State of High Anxiety, if she fears she can't come back."

"Or a Sorrowful State," Lapis offered, "if she misses nuzzling us too much."

"The State of Confusion," suggested Clyde. "That's an easy one for me to fall into."

"A Catatonic State isn't remote for her," I ventured. "She's been there before!"\*

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\*See *A Christmas Fable*, the story that started it all.

Dove asked, "What if she went into a Fugue State, and didn't know us?"

"Worse would be the State of Panic," Mrs. C. said.

"I want her in a Solid State," Alabaster asserted, "solidly here with us!"

Santa spoke again. "With all the ugliness, discord, sadness, sickness, anger, and death OUT THERE, the negative vibrations could vacillate so violently that PM could be tossed and tumbled from State to State. She could succumb to the State of Exhaustion, and never awake."

The group was sobered by that prospect, and quietly reflected on PM's predicament.

Peppermint, who'd been musing in a corner, revealed the reason for his reverie. "Santa, should we cancel the concert tonight? We don't know if SEGWAC has had a hand in this current calamity. Can we afford to risk any more Holiday Helpers?"

"I admit I don't feel much like playing," commented Al, "but PM would want us to do so. The benefit's for the hungry and homeless. We've promised to perform. Plus, there's always the hope that if we play very, very well, we'll reach my pulchritudinous plum puddin' and bring her back!"

Dove returned to the unpleasant subject of SEGWAC. "I know my dad and my brother. Even if SEGWAC's not responsible, once Viper and Parasite discover PM is missing, they won't rest until they find out why. Then they'll wreak so much havoc that PM will be bounced so brutally from State to State that she'll have permanent psychological bruises."

"SEGWAC doesn't have to know PM's missing," Clyde argued avidly. (The diminutive elf looks forward to the concerts so much and couldn't hide his eagerness to visit the Big A. again.) "Rosette can pretend she's PM, either dye her fur or shine a blue light on her – that fooled SEGWAC once – and lip-sync to a recording of PM's voice!"

"We'd lose our Grammy that way," Peppermint objected. "No, if we do the performance, Rosette will sing for herself. I'll take on SEGWAC before I'll willy-nilly, Milli Vanilli, defile my artistic license."

Santa, who had been softly conferring with Mrs. Claus, took charge of the conference. "Mrs. S. and I feel you should carry on with the concert. Maybe if you cause enough Christmas characters and People to reach the same Positive State, you'll be strong enough to reel PM in. It's worth a try – like Alabaster said, where there's hope . . ."

\*

And so it came to pass that I boarded Relicta's spacecraft once again and headed for Manhattan Isle with Peppermint Paunch and the Detectives. (I always wanted to be a roadie.) After the equipment was set up in Madison Square Garden, the Paunchettes retired to my hovel for a brief rest, and I went uptown for an Alexander lesson. While releasing





You're far from home, but in our hearts  
you're here  
In every thought we think on Christmas Day  
If you can't come to us, we'll go to you  
We'll find the light of love to guide the way

You'll be with Santa when he takes the reins  
And shouts Ho! Ho! as in his sleigh he flies  
This Christmas morn you'll be with us again  
We'll see you sparkling in all children's eyes

Noël! Noël! Noël! we sing  
Rejoice! we trill, Rejoice!  
We'll pause a beat and wait to hear  
The echo of your voice  
Noël! (Beat)  
Rejoice! (Beat)



Our song of joy and peace will carol bright  
Our seeds of hope will grow and effloresce  
We'll send our spirits sailing through the sky  
To reach you in the State of Christmasness!

Noël! Noël! Noël! we sing  
Rejoice! we trill, Rejoice!  
We'll pause a beat and wait to hear  
The echo of your voice.  
Noël!  
Rejoice!

Brick crooned his final "Noël," and from nowhere and everywhere came a lilting lilac mezzo "Noël" in response. The audience craned their necks to seek the source of the haunting sound. "Rejoice!" Rosette sang out, and a magical "Rejoice!" floated back. Then we gasped, and gaped, for in the sweeping spotlights PM appeared, glowing and glistening. She seemed so close that all of the crowd stretched their arms to touch her. Then she was gone.



After the last note decrescendoeed, there was a clamorous standing ovation. The band took their bows, but their pleasure from the applause of their appreciative fans was tempered by frustration. PM had been so near, yet they couldn't hold onto her.

"Now that SEGWAC knows PM is ethereal, they'll do their worst to make her ephemeral," Al fretted as we boarded the spaceship. "I fear we're running out of time!"

The Yuletide rockers and I returned to the North Pole. In the crowded spacecraft, the mood was glum and gloomy. I, myself, was dizzy.

In the middle of a sincerely sorrowful sigh, Alabaster exclaimed, "Oh no, I saw her. I was in a Melancholic State, and there she was. What are we going to do? She's moving into the Unhappy State! How are we to get her back? And can we?"

By the time the Christmas Crew landed at the North Pole, it was the dawn of Christmas Eve. Santa congratulated the group on their successful performance and commiserated with them over their futile attempt to bring back PM. The disappointed contingent went wearily to bed.

\*

So that's what's happened.

It's now late Christmas Eve. Everyone here at the North Pole has worked hard all day preparing for Santa's journey. I have been tapping on my portable PC, hoping to produce a happy ending for this epic. But it doesn't look good, friends. There have been reports that PM has been spotted in the State of Depression, and those who know PM's neuroses are aware how disastrous that can be.

What's worse, she's fading. If I were to speculate (and why not?), I would speculate that SEGWAC has been spewing anger, rage, and ill will into the atmosphere to push and pummel PM past the point of no return.

Can it be that PM won't come back? Could I, perhaps in an Unconscious State, have inadvertently willed her away? Have I been jealous? (If so, I'll admit it, for I do not claim to suppress any of my bad personality traits.) Did I envy PM's success as an actress and singer? Ah, my mid-life crisis has bred such debilitating doubts. Could my subconscious be so sodden with spite and spittle that I'd do so dastardly a deed as to destine my alter ego for oblivion? No, I won't believe that. It's not my fault. I just know it. I will not acquiesce to a PM-less existence.



But this may be it, dear, dear, doubly-dear Readers. This may be the last Card – for without PM, these rambling Christmas rhapsodies have no *raison d'être*. The least I can do for you, fellow followers of the perils of PM, is to record the final minutes of this less-than-merry Christmas Eve.

Mrs. Claus has put the finishing touches on 250,000 Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and Clyde has printed the final Naughty & Nice list for Santa's perusal. (Oops, in my agony of self-malignment, I've forgotten to change that one Naughty on my list to Nice. Sorry.)

Santa Claus has gathered his gang around him, and is starting a speech:

"We're about to depart on another trek, with an empty harness at the front of my vehicle. PM usually finds some inspiring words to say about this time, but since she's not here, I'll try my best to make do. Yes, our good and true compatriot is missing, and all of us are saddened by her absence. But overshadowing the possible loss of one much-loved charismatic Christmas creature is the greater threat of a more horrifying loss – the loss of PEACE. As you are all too aware, the world teeters on the border of the State of War, and I am much disturbed by those OUT THERE who declare that the taking up of arms is inevitable, even desirable, especially those who would send young People into combat, egging them on from cozy comfort thousands of miles from the bullets and rockets. Who has the right to ask another to die for him, or her?

"In my very essence and being, I am a pacifist. I value every soul on this planet – every life is so precious. I am not political. I've seen too many wars in my mythical existence to argue the merits of any one of them, for I've seen the scars that fighting leaves on People's minds and bodies. How few ever walk away 'winners.' They're arguing now in the U.S. about who has the authority to declare war, and they cite their Constitution. I too have an authority to cite – Isaiah 2:4: 'And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.' I recognize that there is evil OUT THERE, and I sympathize with People's desire to root it out, to battle it. It's just that over and over and over again, they so hurriedly reach for weapons of destruction. Our thoughts and prayers are with those soldiers who may be forced to fight, and with their families."





There's a brief break as Santa fingers his beard. "It's time for the annual lighting of our North Pole Christmas tree. Our purpose tonight is children – children provide the hope for OUT THERE. With the gifts we give goes Love, for Love (our L-word) is the true conqueror of evil. As you know, I have no Minister of Defense – we need one not at the North Pole. But I do – or did – no, do! – have an Ambassador of Good Will and Christmas, and it is her essence we'll take with us tonight, that with our ride we'll spread her message: 'Peace on Earth, Good Will to All!'"

We have circled the massive tree outside Santa's house and hold hands, paws, and tails. With as much joy as they can muster, the Christmas Monsterland Oratorio Society is choiring a stirring, inspiring "Hallelujah Chorus."

I hear the clock strike twelve. The tree is lit! The tinsel is tinkling against the ornaments and the electric lights are twinkling the message that Christmas is bigger than all of us.

Look! There's a star shooting across the sky! It's landing on top of the North Pole tree!

"Ooh!" I hear from half the crowd.

"Ahh!" from the other half.

WOW! On a cloud with a silver lining tethered to the falling star's tail, there she is! It's PM!!!!



"It's my beloved," Al's shouting, "corpus delectably intacto!"

"Sugar lump!" she cries.

Hooray! PM is back with us, corporeal once again, though somewhat less corpulent (she lost weight wherever she was).

(If you're a diligent, devout, detail-oriented devotee of these Sagas, you're probably saying "Déjà vu!" Indeed, this miracle ending is reminiscent of the one that ended *Another Christmas Story*—Book II, in which the North Pole was infected with Apathia Sowhata. But isn't Christmas a celebration of miracles? I believe in miracles – and recycling.)



PM is hugging everyone. Now she's hugging them again. She is grabbing her two twins and squeezing the stuffings out of them. Now she's passionately kissing her overjoyed ermine hubby. (We now pause to prevent prurience.)

Back to our story. PM's babbling that she's so glad to be back, and bubbling that she met some very interesting People and Critters in her psychic travels, that the State of the Sublime is a nice place to visit, but she doesn't want to live there without her family and friends.

I've stayed on the rim of the welcome-home circle, not knowing how PM will receive me. "Hey, Chronicler!" I hear, and I inch my way toward her.

"Did I do something worth writing about?" PM grins.

"It will have to suffice. There's no time to come up with a better idea," I shrug. I hang my head and mumble, "I'm sorry if our argument bonkered your bearings."

"It wasn't your fault!" my charitable Christmas compadre assures me as Santa straps her into her harness.



Whew, I think, that's what I've been trying to tell everyone. "Thanks!" I say.

There goes Santa, with PM at the front of the sleigh, Rudolph's nose shining bright, and Mrs. C. and me waving from below.

In mid-hand-flap, I've just realized that I am at the North Pole. I'm not in St. Louis, the story hasn't been written, much less edited, proofread, printed, and painted, and it's minutes into Christmas Day! I've got to run and catch Relicta before she and Dove take off for the Salvation Army Christmas dinner. I hope she'll fly me to St. Louis. (*Note to Mom: If I don't make it home, see the last sentence.*)

For what felicity the scribblings of this scribe has brought to your holidays, I take full credit. But should one among you fail to reach a higher State of Christmas Consciousness, should your holidays not be merry and your New Year not happy, remember (as PM confirmed): It's not my fault.

*Peace*